



Oilthigh  
Ghlaschu

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***“...like a cog in a wheel”:***  
a ‘four lenses’ critical reflection  
on the summer pre-sessional.

**GLASCHU AG  
ATHARRACHADH  
AN T-SAOGHAIL**

**A WORLD  
TOP 100  
UNIVERSITY**

# Introduction

- Brookfield (2017): ‘four lenses’ of critical reflection.
- Solutions or alternative models. 
- A space for discussion: *shared* experiences; approaches / adjustments? 
- “Part rant”

# What are we saying...?

## The Summer Pre-sessional:

- *“got through...”; “getting over...”*
- *“more time to recover from...”*
- *“... Summer Pre-Sessional Anxiety Scale,...dropping from Heart attack down past Palpitations to the relative tranquillity of Minor niggles”*

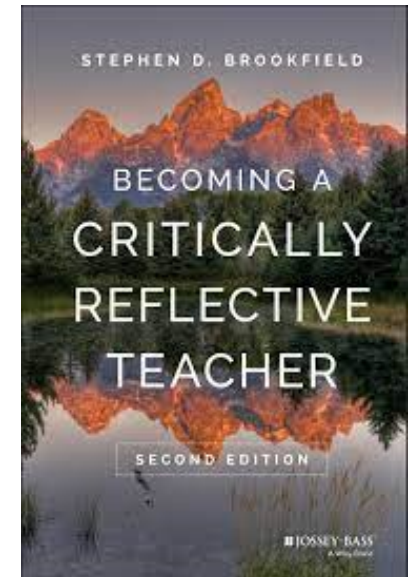


# Brookfield (2017)

- to ‘hunt the assumptions’ that inform practice.
- a ‘stance of permanent enquiry’ >> ‘productively disturbing insights’

## ‘Four lenses’ of critical reflection:

- *Student eyes*
- *Colleagues’ perceptions*
- *Personal experience*
- *Theory/research*



# Interests, Wellbeing, Precarity, Autonomy

1. *Whose **interests** does this model serve: students, teachers, institutions?*
2. *What impact does such intensive periods of work have on the mental and physical **wellbeing** of staff and students?*
3. *Do summer Pre-sessionals offer choice and reliable annual posts, or do they in fact reflect the worst forms of insecure, **precarious employment** that plague the wider sector?*
4. *Is teacher **autonomy** – a cornerstone of professional identity – really possible in such tightly-bound settings?*

# Interests: *student, teacher, institution?*

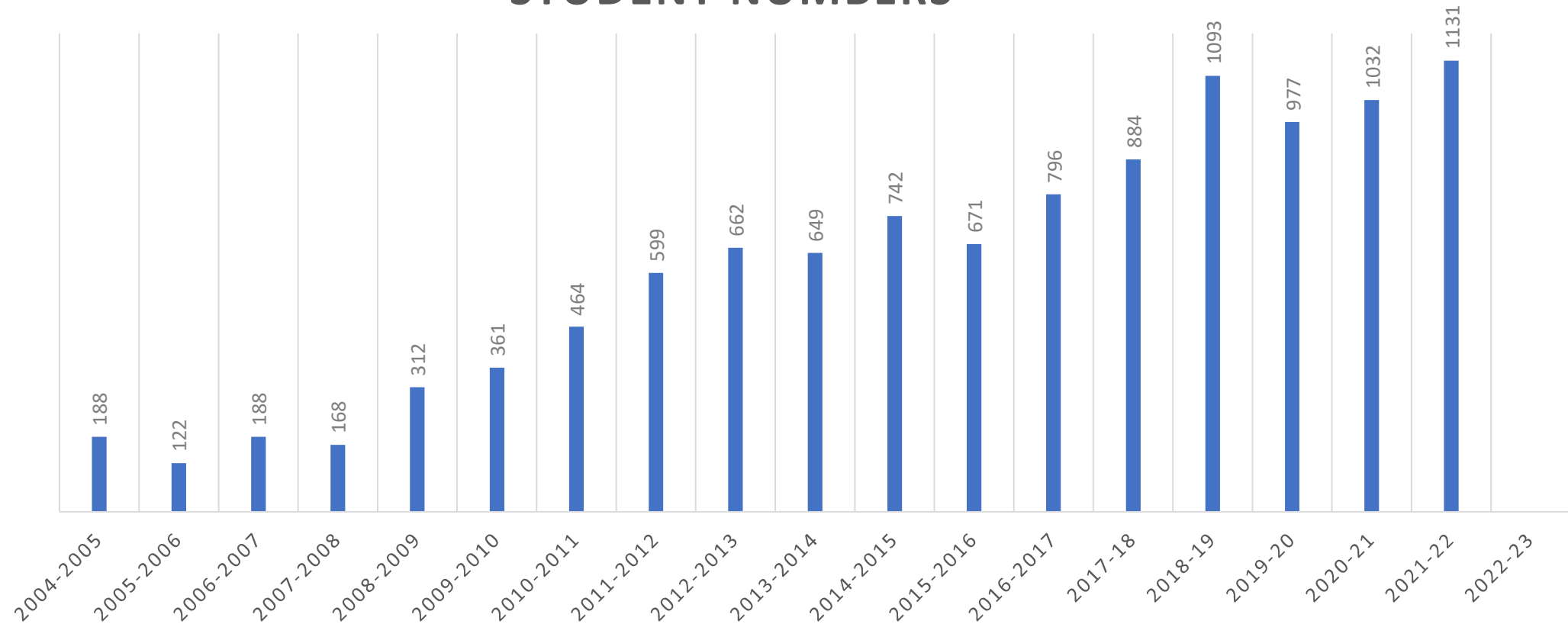
- Student: high satisfaction rates and feedback.
- ‘perceived value and reward in undertaking the (PS) programme’ (Pearson, 2020)
- Glasgow PS 2022 - > 60 teachers

*“Great **staff** and wonderful **colleagues**, very **mutually supportive**; teaching teams provide excellent support. Solid **course design**”*

*“the **working environment** and overall **professional approach** in delivering the programme”*

# In other news...

## SUMMER PRE-SESSIONAL STUDENT NUMBERS



# What is success?

- changing role: less teaching, more convening + recruitment.
- Considerable strain and anxiety.
- *“...you feel like a cog in a wheel rather than a human...”*.
- Who’s at the wheel?





# Precarity



- “fixed-term”; (*“insecurely-contracted”; “precariously-employed”*)

*\*March 2023, JNCHES Contract Types: ‘...there will be specifically defined reasons in any organisation for offering indefinite or fixed term employment’.*

- Returning colleagues (80%, 2022) + new applicants.
- **2023: student applications > 50% down!!**
- ‘once they are “commercially successful”, EAP programmes are perceived as merely a “commercial” activity rather than an academic one and therefore may be vulnerable’ (Fulcher, 2009);

# Precarity



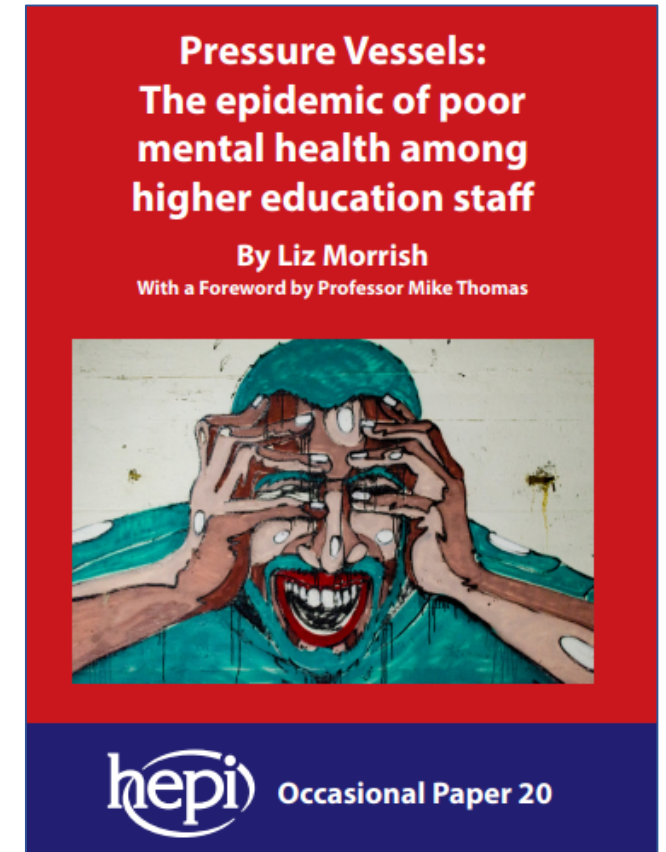
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- Returning colleagues (80%, 2022) + new applicants.
- **2023: student applications > 50% down!!**
- ‘How can the ideals of EAP praxis be realised if EAP is a commodity? If conditions of employment are precarious, if EAP is considered primarily as a profitmaking enterprise...no surprise if practitioners question their loyalty to the profession’ (Bruce and Ding, 2017)

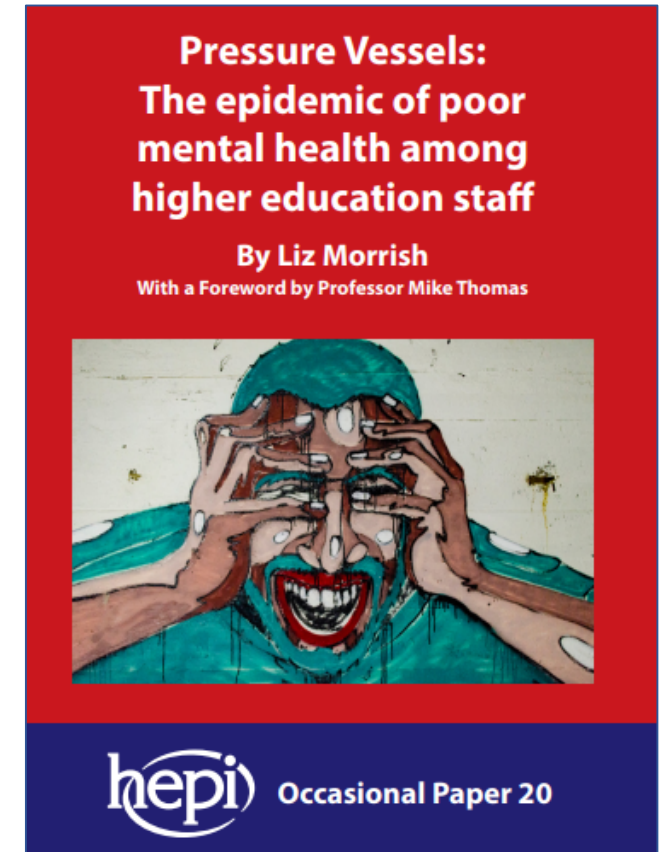
# Wellbeing

- HEIs – “*pressure vessels*” (Morrish, 2019); “*anxiety machines*” (Hall and Bowles, 2016)
  - 70% ↑ counselling referrals
  - 60% ↑ occupational health.
  - “fixed-term” – c.50% report poor mental health.
- 
- Pre-sessional = fourth term(!)  
*“The workload / mental load increases due to switching between courses and because I’m tired, with another 6 ½ weeks to go until I get a break.”*



# Wellbeing

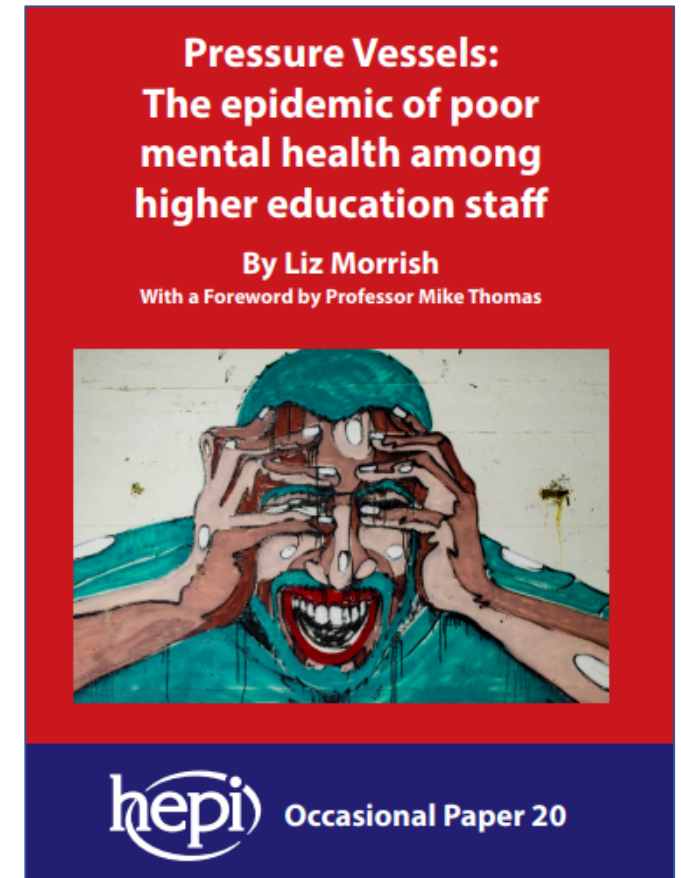
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- Pre-sessional = fourth term(!)  
*“a fairly constant battle to stay afloat – regular 60-70hr weeks, lost weekends and sleep which has real impacts on home life and wellbeing.”*



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- ‘*Staff in HE are working more than 2 unpaid days (50.4 FTE hours) per week*’.

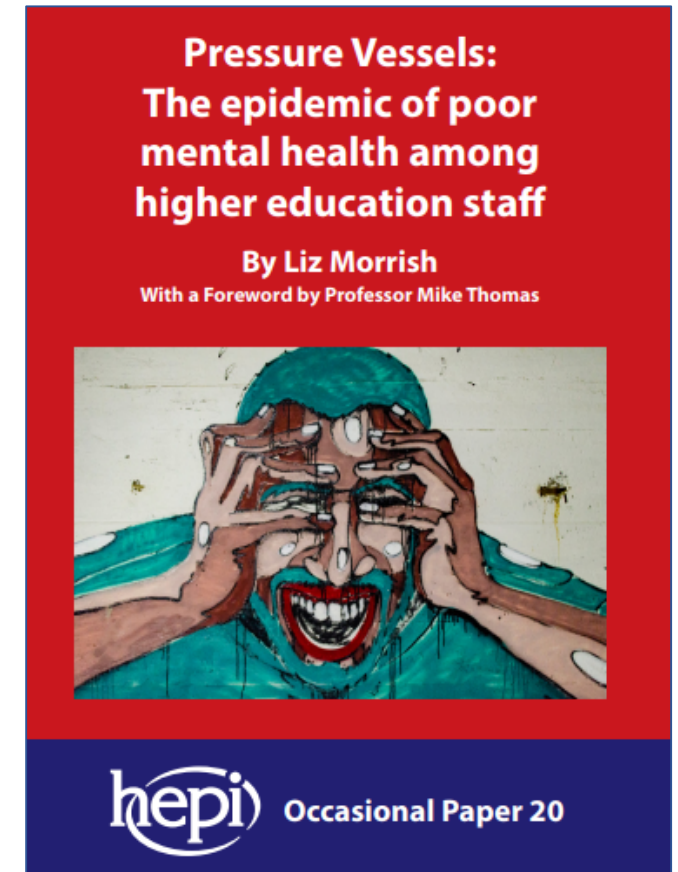
(UCU Workload Survey, 2022)





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- “fixed-term” – c.50% report poor mental health.
- Summer Pre-sessionals a hotbed of unpaid labour.



# Autonomy

- Agency and activism in HE – performance management and standards surveillance culture (Sachs, 2016; Murphy, et. al, 2021)
- Quality assurance &/vs. professional development.

*“**Unrealistic** marking expectations”; “**too much** admin and form-filling compared to teaching load”*

- Pursuit of TEAP CF accreditation / portfolio development.
  - Perceptions of [compulsory] Observations of Teaching: *intrusion, vulnerability, empowerment, development* (Macdiarmid, 2021).
- Reduction in paperwork and expanded range of options.

# Conclusions?

- Summer Pre-sessional is a difficult place to be. ‘Pressure vessels’ / ‘anxiety machines’.
- a ‘dilemmatic space’ (Fransson and Grannäs, 2013); messy decision making –[teachers] ‘do the best they can under the circumstances’ (Kemmis and Smith, 2008).
- Institutional interests + structural imperatives often incompatible with wellbeing.
- Critical reflection via ‘four lenses’ offers way to step back and see; “to recover”.

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